

## **A MATURE SPIRITUALITY FOR TODAY: SOME SALIENT CHARACTERISTICS**

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## A MATURE SPIRITUALITY FOR TODAY Some Salient Characteristics

A previous article in this Journal (Parappully, 2003) described developments in philosophy and science which affect worldviews. The first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a shift from the mechanistic-dualistic to the holistic-ecological paradigm. This shift in worldview has affected every field of human experience. The impact is becoming more and more pronounced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this article I describe the impact of changed paradigms on spirituality.

Spirituality as explored in this article is not limited to any particular religious perspective, but has special relevance for Catholic religious and clergy. Much of current understandings of religious life in the Catholic Church and many of the practices of religious life are vestiges from the old mechanistic and dualistic paradigm. Most religious orders in the Church were founded in the Modern period, extending roughly from 1600 to 1950, during which the dualistic-mechanistic paradigm provided the dominant worldview. Naturally, spiritualities of these religious were influenced and shaped by that worldview.

Spirituality and religion are often, wrongly, considered to be the same. Religion is born of the awareness of the transcendent—that which is beyond us, often personified as a Supreme Being or Deity --together with expression of that awareness in conceptual, cultural, and social form (Sperry, 2001). Religion involves a shared belief system (*Creed*), common rituals (*Cult*), and generally accepted norms of behaviour (*Code*). As Kelly (1995) observes, the term religion signifies “the codified, institutionalized, and ritualized expressions of peoples’

communal connections to the Ultimate” (p. 4, in Emmons, 1999, p. 93)

Pargament (1997) considers the search for significance and for the sacred as the distinguishing marks of the religious sentiment. He defines “religion as a process, *a search for significance in ways related to the sacred...* Religion has to do with the building, changing, and holding on to the things people care about in ways that are tied to the sacred” (32). ) This definition and description, I believe, are more characteristic of spirituality than religion per se. (later addition)

Spirituality, on the other hand, is a personal experience of the transcendent, not necessarily mediated by social or religious institutions. It has to do with a search for meaning, belonging, and connectedness beyond the self. It involves the core values that shape one’s beliefs and behaviour. It is built on self-transcendence--the awareness that there is an unfinishedness, an incompleteness to one’s existence, that there are realities beyond oneself that give meaning, purpose and direction to one’s existence.

(For theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (in Emmons, 1999)) transcendence is the striving toward some possibility not present in the material world. “Strivings that are oriented above and beyond the self, that reflect an integration of the individual with larger and more complex units, or that reflect deepening or maintaining a relationship with a higher power reflect a desire to transcend the self” (Emmons, 1999, pp. 101-102) (later addition)

Spirituality as openness to the transcendent involves the capacity to stand

outside our immediate sense of time and place and view life from a larger, more inclusive perspective. It calls for reaching out above and beyond our self to the integration of our self with larger and more complex units or systems. It implies a sense of the interconnectedness of all of reality, and often a sense of oneness or unity in which all boundaries disappear. The neuropsychology of spiritual experience (Newberg & D'Aquili, 1998; Newberg, D'Aquili, & Rause, 2001) attests that experiences of increased unity over multiplicity is a salient feature of spiritual experiences.

Spirituality involves everything that enhances the sense of the sacred, that promotes connectedness and unity in human life. Spirituality as openness to transcendence is a subjective experience that exists both within and outside traditional religious systems. It “can be found anywhere, not only in temples, churches, synagogues, and monasteries, but also in music and dance, in the beauty of nature, or the intimacy of a love relationship, and in any moment of ordinary life” (Vaughan, Wittine, & Walsh, 1996, p. 500). The focus of spirituality is human life in its totality in the context of everyday living.

Spirituality refers to our basic attitude to life, the whole of life, and not simply the so-called religious dimension of life. It includes all our behaviours that flow from that attitude. Our spirituality is certainly reflected in the way we pray, but it is also shown in how we live and relate—how we go about our daily lives. Spirituality “is simply the way that people should live in the world” (Amaladoss, 1999, p. 23). Our spirituality expresses who we are and manifests in the way we live. A life characterized by a healthy spirituality manifests in virtuous behaviour. A life characterized by unhealthy spirituality

manifests in deviant, dysfunctional and destructive behaviour.

Personality psychologist Robert Emmons provides a comprehensive definition of spirituality that brings together the various features and dimensions of spirituality described above:

Spirituality is typically defined quite broadly, with the term encompassing a search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, for the highest of human potential. Religion and spirituality have generally been defined as the realm of life which is concerned with ultimate purpose and meaning of life, a set of principles and ethics to live by, commitment to God or a higher power, a recognition of the transcendent in everyday experience, a selfless focus, and a set of beliefs and practices that is designed to facilitate a relationship with the transcendent. (1999, pp. 92-93)

### Some Prominent Characteristics

In the light of the changed paradigms and the understanding of spirituality described above, I present below what I consider to be some prominent features of the emerging holistic-ecological spirituality.

1. **Spirituality of wholeness, not perfection.** In the dualistic-mechanistic worldview, order, stability and harmony were considered supreme goods. The perfect state was one in which everything worked in perfect order, where there were not faults, failures or breakdowns. Chaos was seen as the ultimate enemy and order as the ultimate good. In terms of the spiritual life, holiness of life came to be equated with perfection; we became holy if we were faultless and we did everything orderly--perfectly. Religious life, for example, came to be seen as the *institute of perfection*. Growing in the love of God and

neighbour was not as important as living an orderly and faultless life. Even the slightest fault had to be carefully guarded against. The price was the tyranny of guilt and scrupulosity, and the stress, tension and dysfunctional behaviors that often accompany such perfectionism.

A holistic-ecological spirituality seeks wholeness not perfection. Such a spirituality seeks to integrate and honour all of life's experiences, including failure and sin as pathways to God. In deed, failure and sin become the crucible in which we are purified like gold in fire. We have to endure the anguish and pain that result from failure and sin and find God and grow in holiness through that anguish. As the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung points out, to round itself out, life calls not for perfection but for completeness, for wholeness.

Referring to the spirituality of perfection associated with religious life, Benedictine sister Joan Chittister writes:

It is important to realize, then, that one thing religious life is not is a perfect state of life for perfect people. It is not a state of life where perfection is even supposed. It is a state of life where effort is assumed and failure is taken for granted, where the human quest rather than the deluded notion of human flawlessness is the content of life. (2002, p. 7)

Hagiographies often highlight the dimension of perfection expected of saints. For example, commenting on St. John Berchmans after the Saint's death, his rector wrote:

What we *universally* admired in him was that *in all the virtues* he showed himself *perfect* and that, with the aid of divine grace to which he responded to his utmost,

he *performed all his actions with all the perfection* that can be imagined. (quoted in Au & Cannon, 1995, p. 67; emphasis added).

2. **A process spirituality.** As Ira Progoff, developer of the Intensive Journal, observes, spirituality can be seen in terms of products of the spiritual journey or in terms of the process of the journey (Dorff, 1980, Progoff, 1975). In terms of products, we look for answers which certain spiritual journeys have generated and validated in the course of time. When we look at spirituality in terms of product, we speak of the rules, the rituals, and the teachings which reflect the spiritual experience of certain religious persons and individuals. These become encoded as the three C's of traditional religion: Code (rules), cult (rituals), and creed (teachings).

A product spirituality is a spirituality based on traditions. It is faithfully following the products of other people's spiritual journeys now enshrined in books of rules, guidelines, prayers and rituals. When we look at spirituality as a process, we attend to the process that generates the codes, cults and creeds—our own journey, our own life experiences. We seek to discover God in the process of our own lives. We listen to the God who speaks to us in the depths of our own being. We listen to the invitations of grace that comes to us in the moment-by-moment unfolding of our lives. We experience God not in books of prayers, but in the context of our everyday experience.

3. **Spirituality based on internal conviction, not rules.** In the mechanistic worldview rules and

regulations had a very important part. Perfect fulfillment of rules and regulations were presented as the means to growing in holiness. “Do this, and you will live!” This is the scripture quotation that my Provincial wrote in my Constitutions at my first profession of religious vows. Following the rule was a guarantee of holiness.

In the early stages of one’s spiritual life rules have an important role to play. They are necessary to provide an infra structure that would support and guide the novice. It’s like a child learning to walk needing the guidance of someone. But as the child grows, it learns to manage life on its own. So too in our spiritual life. As we mature in spiritual life, we have to evolve our own personal spirituality. We have evolve a spirituality based on our conviction born of lived experience rather than beliefs handed down to us.

When we read the Scripture, Jesus’ opposition to the law strikes us. His focus was always on the human person, not on the laws that sought to strangle his freedom.. St. Paul had harsh words to say on a spirituality based on the rigid application of the law. The law, he said, is “meant for murderers, adulterers, extortioners, etc. The law kills.

What the renowned theologian Karl Rahner had to say on rules and regulations is relevant here. He prayed:

Your commands may be hard, but they set us free.  
But Lord, what of the commandments imposed upon us by human beings, issued in your name?....  
First there are 2414 paragraphs of the law-book. And even these haven’t sufficed: how many “responses” to inquiries have been added to bring joy to the heart of the jurists! And then

there are several thousand liturgical decrees clamoring for our attention.... There are also various “official bulletins” in the Kingdom of your Holy Spirit, not to mention countless files, inquiries, replies, reports, decisions meetings, citations, instructions from every kind of Congregation and Commission... But are you really the God of such laws?....

The prescribed cut of the clerical gown in itself has nothing to do with the Holiness of Your Being—I can serve You as a priest no matter how long or short a cassock I wear. You are not present in that law, just as You would not be present in its opposite. Why, then, must I seek You in precisely this way, when you could just as well be found in another?.... I always feel that if one is not careful, he can easily become a mere fulfiller of the law, doing what is commanded externally and quite apathetically. He can turn into a “legalist,” an anxious, slavish worshipper of the law, who thinks he has fulfilled all justice before you when he has fulfilled the human ordinance. Such a man mistakes the letter of the law for you yourself. (Rahner, 1989/1984, pp. 27-32)

Reflecting on the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Henry Nouwen, onetime professor at Yale Divinity School, had this to say:

What is characteristic of secular society is that it imprisons us in its *compulsions*. It is a life filled with *ought* and *musts*. You *must* do this, you *ought* to do that, you *cannot* be here or there, and so forth. It is this compulsions that constitute the *false self*. (in Nomura, 2002, p. 112)

4. **Spirituality that honours our embodiment.** There is no isolated (spirit-only) experience of spirituality. The holistic-ecological worldview sees

deep connections between matter and spirit, body and soul, between this and the world to come. It does away all dualisms, especially with the body-soul dualism. One does not grow in the spirit at the expense of the body.

A holistic-ecological spirituality is body-based. It sees the body as the vehicle of the spirit, a friend, not enemy of the spirit. To grow in the spirit we need to honour our body and take care of our body. Exercise and recreation, rest and relaxation become important ingredients of a spirituality that honours our embodiment.

A body-honouring spirituality is comfortable with sexuality. To be embodied means to be sexual. Our sexuality, our being male or female, affects our relations, to others, and to God as well. It is important to restore body and sexuality to their rightful place in spirituality.

A holistic Christian spirituality... regards sexuality as intrinsically connected to our capacity to love ...Often our sexuality resides in the shadow, rejected and out cast, leaving our hearts cold and making generous and joyful self-giving impossible. ....Only when we are at home in our body, gracefully accepting ourselves as sexual beings, will we be able to securely and freely enter into loving relationships and commitments (Au & Cannon, 1995, p. 118).

We must remember that the Son of God took on our flesh to be with us. Denying the goodness and worthiness of the human body is a slap in the face of incarnation. It is a negation of the beauty of the incarnation, a rejection of God's embodiment.

5. **Spirituality that embraces the sensuous.** The Cartesian split between mind and matter, and the eventual downgrading of matter also led to the

exiling of the sensual from spirituality. Logos triumphed over Eros. Anything sensual, particularly tactility became suspect.

This is so different from the attitude and behaviour of Jesus of Nazareth. He relished the sensual. The lilies of the field, a glass of wine, the embrace of children, the caress and tender attention of the sinful woman of the Gospel—Jesus did not consider these as nemesis of the soul, but delighted in them.

The very idea that a person's spiritual life can develop to the full without ever having smelled a field full of roses or seen the lake at dawn or sat in high grass on the top of a hill or felt silk against the skin or hugged a dog or held an infant to the breast approaches the laughable. (Chittister, 2002, p. 146)

Enjoying the colours and sounds of changing seasons—the freshness of spring, the luxuriousness of summer, the graying and falling leaves of autumn, the bleakness of winter—, the rhythm and razzle of falling rain and waterfalls, the beauty and grandeur of sunrise and sunset are ways we relate to the sensuous.

We embrace the sensuous when we cultivate aesthetic interests. Good art—painting, music, dance, drama—expresses the harmony between the sacred and the profane, between the everyday and the transcendent, and thus transports us to the realm of the spiritual (Kraft, 1973).

Embracing the sensual can enrich our spirituality. The liturgy of the Church, for example, would become so much more spiritually satisfying, if the over emphasis on the word (Logos) were balanced by greater attention to the sensual (Eros). The incorporation of

art and movement, powers of imagination and evocative symbols along with soul-stirring music can make the liturgy more sensual and thereby more satisfying.

**A Spirituality of Play.** One way we honour our embodiment and embrace the sensuous is through play—finding time to relax and recreate with friends. In play we let go our control, and surrender to spontaneity. We let go our hierarchical and alienating modes of living and relating and embrace our commonality as humans. We come together simply for being together and enjoying our togetherness.

- 6. Spirituality that respects plurality, not uniformity.** The holistic-ecological paradigm *downplays* hierarchies, absolutes, and objective realities. It does not deny that there is a reality out there, but only that is *a* reality and not *the* reality. *There is a reality out there, but is not perceived as it is.* The perception of (the reality out there) that reality is conditioned by the perspectives of the observer. Because there are multiple ways of looking at the same reality, there are as many different realities as there are observers. One cannot say one way of looking at something is better than another. Beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder.

So too, there are multiple ways of entering into the mystery of God. To claim that one way is better than another, or, worse, that there is only one way, is to fall back into the hierarchical systems and the theology of superiority sanctified by the dualistic-mechanistic paradigm.

- 7. Spirituality that is comfortable with ambiguity.** The mechanistic

worldview provided certainties. In the mechanistic model if the parts worked, we could be certain the whole machine would work well. Hence the emphasis on order, stability, uniformity. Such a worldview also gave rise to absolutes. We could see reality in black and white. (There were absolute truths. Something was right or wrong.)

Not so in the new world-view. Relativity and quantum theories show that the context is an important determinant of reality. Because objectivity has been undermined, we cannot always be certain of the truth, of what is appropriate, of what is right. There is the anguish that comes from uncertainty. There is need to search for the truth, for what is right and proper. Norms of behavior do not come in neat packages, accurately labeled. One has to struggle, to search and to pray to discover the will of God in a particular circumstance.

- 8. Creative spirituality.** All living systems are constantly self-renewing. They thrive on change. They are “*autopoietic*” – the term that the Chilean neuroscientists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela invented to describe the self-renewing nature of living systems. An autopoietic system undergoes continual structural changes while preserving its pattern of organization. A living system has an inherent tendency to create novelty. Any system that seeks to maintain equilibrium disintegrates. Newtonian physics, which supplied the machine model for all systems, also produced the laws of thermodynamics which govern all such systems. The second law of thermodynamics tells us that, when a system reaches equilibrium, entropy or disintegration sets in. (Capra, 1982, 1997).

The older spirituality based on the mechanistic-dualistic worldview gave priority to stability and equilibrium. The new based on the holistic-ecological thrives on change. It is more open to new experiences, to new ways of enriching one's spiritual life. It does not rely on the old and the tried, but is highly adaptive to changing circumstances.

Sometimes, one of the hardest things to believe is that things can be different, that we can attain holiness in ways other than the tried and trusted, that there are other possibilities. An over reliance on tradition can stifle the call of the spirit to newness.

9. **Spirituality of solidarity and communion.** The holistic-ecological paradigm highlights the interdependence and interconnectedness of all reality. Ecosystems are characterized by pervasive cooperation and collaboration. A holistic-ecological spirituality recognizes the importance of cooperation and collaboration for the progress of the human community. Without harmonious relationships built on justice and equality such progress is not possible.

The awareness of the interconnectedness of all reality leads to the recognition that divisiveness and discrimination are inimical to authentic spirituality. A holistic-ecological spirituality decries and denounces every form of injustice and oppression, discrimination and divisiveness and seeks to build solidarity and communion. Concern for justice and peace issues is an integral element of a holistic-ecological spirituality. Such a spirituality has socio-political implications.

10. **Feminist spirituality.** By feminist spirituality is meant a spirituality that respects the equality of men and women in every sphere of life. It is a spirituality that "is critical of the reality of women's subordination and committed to changing attitudes and structures which reinforce that evil" (Bechtel, 1988, p. 51). It is a spirituality that moves away and seeks to do away with patriarchy – a philosophical, social and political system in which man determined what part woman shall or shall not play, and in which men are given leading roles and all privileges (see Schneiders, 1986).

Feminist spirituality is not same as woman's spirituality which refers to the ways in which women, in contrast to men, relate to the ultimate dimension of life—ways as distinct as women are from men. In contrast to men's spirituality, women's spirituality is "more related to nature and natural processes than to culture; more personal and relational than objective and structural; more diffuse, concrete, and general than focused, universal, abstract; more emotional than intellectual." (Carr, 1986, p. 53).

A specifically feminist spirituality, on the other hand, would be that mode of relating to God, and everyone and everything in relation to God, exhibited by those who are deeply aware of the historical and cultural restriction of women to a narrowly defined 'place' within the wider human (male) 'world.' Such awareness would mean that we are self-consciously critical for the cultural and religious ideologies which deny women full opportunities for self-actualization and self-transcendence. (Carr, 1986, pp. 53-54)

Feminist spirituality affirms the liberation of all oppressed groups and espouses “non-competitive, non-hierarchical, non-dominating modes of relationship among human beings” and consciously struggles “to achieve authentic, interdependent modes of relationship.” It is a spirituality that “strives to be not elitist but inclusive” - in attitudes, behaviour and linguistic expressions. It is a spirituality that is “available for every one, male or female” (Carr, 1986, p. 54-55).

**11. Ecological spirituality.** Ecological awareness recognizes the fundamental interconnectedness and interdependence of all phenomena and the embeddedness of individuals and societies in the cyclical process of nature. More than that, according to the *Gaia* hypothesis first propounded by James Lovelock, planet earth as a whole is a living, self-organizing system. Moreover, there is a complex interweaving of living and non-living systems throughout the biosphere. The universe is alive (see Capra 1997).

Ecologically sensitive spirituality has deep respect for all of creation, especially the earth which sustains and nourishes everything on it. It sees deep connections between matter and spirit, between us humans and the rest of creation and decries the wanton exploitation of the earth and its resources. It seeks to build sustainable human communities and especially to foster a sustainable economy that respects, not exploits the earth's resources for maximum profit.

**12. Contemplative spirituality.** A creative and process oriented spirituality requires that we be present to mystery—to the revelation of the transcendent that we experience in ourselves and around us in the here

and now. It calls for sensitivity. It calls for a contemplative attitude.

To be a contemplative is to be still, to be aware of all that is going on. As the Carmelite monk William McNamara (in Burghardt, 1983) describes it so beautifully, contemplation is taking “a long loving look at something—a child, a glass of wine, a beautiful meal—this is the natural act of contemplation, of loving admiration” (p. 102). Contemplation “requires sensitivity at all levels of our being. We need certain kind of awareness, a certain way of perceiving what is going on in us and around us, a certain way of hearing, of touching, of tasting... (English, 1986, p. 90).

Contemplation, “the long loving look,” is closely linked to the sense of awe and wonder, the ability to be moved by all that is -- the beauty and marvels of creation; the intricate patterns life weaves in us and around us; the sensual and emotional stirrings we experience in us and in our relationships. Albert Einstein links the sense of awe and wonder to the mystical and emphasizes its importance. He wrote:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead. (in Ferris, 1997, p. 287)

We become contemplatives when we begin to experience the extraordinary in the ordinary, a deeper meaning in the mundane. Being contemplative is being truly present to the here-and-now. For example, we can turn a simple walk into a contemplative experience by looking at sights,

listening to the sounds, smelling the odours, feeling the ground, and tasting the air (Kraft, 1974)

- 13. A spirituality of gratitude.** This kind of contemplative attitude, based on a sense of awe and wonder, leads to thankful living: thankful for the gratuitous gift of life, thankful for the marvels of life and creation of which we are a part, or that which we can be privileged to witness.

Gratitude—“the capacity to feel the emotion of thankfulness on a regular and consistent basis, across situations and over time” (Emmons, 1999, p. 172) – is a virtue that has been found to have enormous consequences for physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. The importance of gratitude in spirituality is well expressed by Meister Eckhart, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, who wrote: “If the only prayer you say in your entire life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice” (in Svoboda, 1995, p. 370).

- 14. Spirituality of generosity.** Gratitude is expressed in generosity. Awareness of the blessings we enjoy, we in turn, become generous to others. Reaching out to others in love and compassion is an effective way we express self-transcendence. Through generosity we move away from self-absorption.

Service to others also becomes an expression of solidarity and communion engendered by awareness of interconnection and interdependence. In the ecological framework, success of the whole community depends on the success of its individual members and success of individual members depend on the success of the community as a whole (Capra, 1997). We generously place

our resources at the service of the community.

- 15. Spirituality of liberation.** Liberation here is understood more as self-liberation than liberation of others. We need to be liberated from our narrow mindsets and untested assumptions that keep us bonded to outmoded beliefs and practices; from our prejudices that lead to discrimination and exclusion, to alienation and oppression; from our pessimism that prevent us from standing in awe and wonder; from our self-centredness and selfishness that keep us from being generous; from our pride and our self-sufficiency that make us blind to our interdependence; from our fears that prevent us from being creative; from our insecurities that keep us tied to the tried and the tested rather than venture out in hope and loving confidence into new and untested paths that open before us to lead us ever more deeply into the mystery of God.

In this sense, the holistic-ecological spirituality is also a deeply ascetic spirituality. It is so much more demanding and challenging than the traditional spirituality of perfection in which faithful observance of rules and regulations and prescribed practices of piety and the perfect fulfillment of one’s duties were considered to be the pathway to holiness .

The dualistic-mechanistic paradigm that controlled thought and behaviour throughout the Modern Period (1600-1950) gave rise to a spirituality of perfection. Most religious congregations in the Catholic Church were founded during that period. Their spiritualities were coloured by that paradigm. The holistic-ecological paradigm that emerged toward the second half of the last century and is more and more recognized today calls for a

different kind of spirituality—a spirituality at the heart of which lie the recognition of profound interconnectedness and interdependence of all of creation and the awareness of and reverence for the transcendent reality that permeates and under girds it. This article has described some prominent features of this holistic-ecological spirituality that can be considered to be a mature spirituality for our times.

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